DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 142 CS 204 508

AUTHOR Miller, Susan
TITLE The Development of the Ability to Write Argumentation: Moral and Rhetorical Maturity.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (29th, Denver, Colorado, March 30-April 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development; *Cognitive Processes; College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Moral Development; Rhetoric; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Kohlberg (Lawrence)

ABSTRACT

Freshman composition students have difficulties in moving to new stages of cognitive ability similar to the difficulties experienced by poorer writers in moving to new levels of syntactic maturity. A model of moral/cognitive development created by Lawrence Kohlberg indicates that human responses to moral choices move through as many as six stages of moral growth. Freshman composition students assigned one of Kohlberg's moral dilemma problems consistently gave responses that were between Kohlberg's stages three and four. One implication of this finding is that more accurate developmental models for teaching writing must go beyond those for remedial-level instruction to develop a model of cognitive growth in nonremedial students. Kohlberg notes a moving ahead and falling back in moral-cognitive development which seems to be paralleled in the development of cognitive complexity and rhetorical strategies. A second implication may be that the cognitive growth of students must be initiated by putting students in writing and discussion situations that lead them toward the level of moral/cognitive development typical of those who appreciate most literature. More highly developed writing and cognition will be fostered by teaching the terminology of complicated perspectives. (Student responses to a moral dilemma problem are appended.) (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Susan Miller

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

ED165142

Susan Miller
Dept. of English
University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ABILITY TO WRITE ARGUMENTATION:

MORAL AND RHETORICAL MATURITY

This presentation might well be called "Errors and Expectations Again," for it begins where Mina Shaughnessy's work did: staring, blear-eyed and helpless at a set of student papers that immediately evoked "Oh where did I go wrong?" I was wondering how my freshman English class, who had progressed well enough through typical assignments of comparison and contrast topics to process, classification, and cause and effect problems, and who could understand Rogerian argumentative techniques well enough to write letters persuading me to buy a gramoputer to fumigate student essays, could not--push coming to shove in the eighth week of a ten week course--write coherent, well-informed and satisfying arguments either for or against euthanasia.

Argumentation--classical dialectical persuasion--I and the teaching assistants teaching the course with me decided--is beyond these students. Or, perhaps, we must have taught it poorly. So we taught it again, the next week, defining the problem as an argument persuading some other teacher to change some procedural matter in a course. The students, having heard all of this twice and having received a model for organizing such an argument from Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, wrote much better the second time on this immediate topic about which they had information and some personal involvement.

However, since this sequence of events left me wondering why I and my students had failed with the first assignment, I began to consider the problem seriously. I already knew, from a sample inventory of freshman writing students taken the

CS204508

previous year, that Ohio State's homogeneous population of 17 to 18 year-old open admissions students are poorly prepared, highly inexperienced readers and writers. Despite their persistently inflated high school and college grades (only 17% had received C's or lower in high school English, only 40% receive C's or lower in their one quarter college writing requirement), samples had been judged by dispassionate holistic and analytic readers to be, 71% of them, written by students still poorly prepared for college writing in the 5th week of a typical quarter of their first year in college. But the failure that dismayed me in my class was nonetheless incongruent with their performance up to that assignment. Their writing was significantly poorer than I was accustomed to expect: the organization was mechanical rather than organic, the thesis statements somehow rang false, and the reasoning seemed if not illogical, at least labored and tense. I knew that these students' reading and writing experiences before college were minimal, and I had done enough research to learn already that they perceived accurately their difficulty not with mechanical skills so much as with composition and comprehension skills: finding a thesis, maintaining unity, organizing, and writing transitions, as well as understanding words in reading, remembering what they read, and concentrating. The close relationship between their reading ability and the readability of their writing had been made clear by the research I directed in preparation for a full-blown remedial writing program. We found that inexperienced remedial-level writers tended to have great difficulty disagreeing with each other or with an assigned author. They also tended, as Mina Schaughnessy says her students did, to write either at the level of homey folk wisdom based on what Johnson called"received systems," or to lapse immediately into detailed personal examples related to a generalization only by the faith of the reader.

But the students in my class were not, by and large, remedial-level students who score 15 or below on the English ACT test. No one had lapsed into a detailed story about putting his or her pet dog out of its misery, but the papers before me were, in my view, juvenile and extraordinarily innocent of complication. I had often had this experience before. For ten years I had seen nicely progressing classes scatter in the wind before public issues like euthanasia, desegregation, drug laws, the vote for 18 year olds, and other such universal problems.

I decided to persist. I had a new hunch about those disappointing papers on euthanasia, and wondered if my disappointment at what appeared to me to be boring and unsophisticated analyses of the problem was not instead my misunderstanding the terms of arguments that most 17 and 18 year-old freshmen can reasonably be expected to formulate. I had seen my students progress through the stages of reasoning associated with expository writing, and had expected them to be able, within weeks, to write persuasively about a universally important issue for a universally interested audience. Having not only suddenly distanced the content of the assigned discourse from the immediate experience of the writers, but also having increased the level of abstraction of the writing situation (from letter to their teacher to essay for all readers), I had received suddenly poorer writing. Perhaps I had just asked for a level of cognitive ability and problem solving that was not available to these students. I already know some facts to support my surmise: the syntactic maturity level of 12th graders is two whole steps below that of the skilled professional writers who usually address such subjects. According to James Britten (The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18), students only begin to deal adequately with instructing or persuading (conative) discourse at the age of 18. And Walter Loban, in a study of 211 children from kindergarten

through grade twelve, found that a marked spurt of syntactic complexity occurs in better students in the 12th grade, but that poorer students' writing tends to level off and remain static at that age.

I decided that in the absence of developmental standards based on writings from post-high school students both older and less attached to their families than those whose writing is the subject of Britten's or Loban's work, I would apply the model of moral/cognitive development described by Harvard's Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg, a psychologist whose work is admittedly controversial, insists that human responses to moral choices move through up to six possible stages of moral growth that determine our approaches to questions of value.

Put reductively, there are three groups of 2 such stages: Preconventional, Conventional, and Post-conventional thinking. In preconventional stages 1 and 2, children (and many people who later become criminals) see values only in terms of tit for tat physical consequences. "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine," the morality of, e.g., Chaucer's Prioress, is the most sophisticated reasoning available to them. In the Conventional stages, 3, 3.5, and 4, individuals maintain the expectations of family, a group, or their country. In stage 3, there is much conformity to stereotypical images of what the majority do, and being a "nice" person is highly valued. In stage 4, the maintenance of law, order, and the social system is valued. Right behavior consists of doing your duty, respecting authority, and maintaining the social order for its own sake. Most adults reason at one of these Conventional levels. Kohlberg has also discovered by interviewing individuals over years of their lives that we understand and can postulate reasoning one level above our own, but no farther above our own than that.

In the Post-conventional stages, 5 and 6, the individual separates values from

the systems of authority, law, or tradition. Stage 5 thinkers define "right" in terms of general individual rights, are clearly aware of relativism, and emphasize due process. Stage 5 thinking is the official morality of the American Constitution. Emphasis is given to personal values and "opinion." It is interesting that Kohlberg describes the transition from conventional to post-conventional levels as a time of disillusionment and rebellion, expressed often by declarations of meaninglessness. He may be shedding light on the angst of what most of us recognize as the "universal sophomore," as well as helping us understand the relationship of the revolution in the 1960's and early 70's to the history of American consciousness.

But back to stage 6 thinking, which very few people reach--Kohlberg cites Martin Luther King, Jesus, and a few others. Here "right" is associated with universal principles of justice, equality, reciprocity, and individuality.

Kohlberg's work, like the studies of Britten and Loban, suggests that college instructors' notions of developmental writing instruction are too often limited to thinking about remedial programs. My students' responses were, perhaps, simply the most complex that inexperienced readers and writers at their ages could do.

Using this hypothesis, I asked a few teachers to assign one of Kohlberg's classic moral dilemma problems for the same week of another quarter of the same course. The population of students was the same, and these teachers had all given the same assignments that I had given early in my fated course. Their students were generally as well-prepared to respond to an argumentative problem as mine had been. The problem was the following:

> In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $200 for the radium and charged

> $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. The druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.--Should the husband have done that? Why?

The results I have attached as an appendix: repeatedly, persistently, the level of response of this complete sample class stays between Kohlberg's Conventional stages 3 and 4. The students are torn between codified morality, doing what "society" says, and Heinz's personal needs. The content of these papers shows that these students at the end of the first quarter of freshman instruction, taught not only by me, but by any random selection of less experienced teachers using the same material, would inevitably produce similar, and to a reader of professional essays, disappointing, responses to questions that demand sophisticated, highly distanced, perspectives.

The conclusions that I may draw from my experiment interest a teacher anxious to lead students toward Post-conventional understanding because they make concrete the teacher's traditional complaint that "they cannot think." Obviously these freshmen could think, but could not think within the same frame of reference that I and my abstract assignment would expect them to use. No amount of work with the syllogism or set theory earlier in the course would, I realize, have improved the complexity of these typical inexperienced freshman responses given the students' previous lack of practice, their ages, and their lack of experience as independent adults. The nature of the writing crisis, seen by those outside of the university community as sudden attack of aphasia about spelling (perhaps analagous to the equally sudden Great Vowel Shift in 1500), is instead defined by the reasoning of

these sincere but Conventional thinkers who have little practice composing original responses to increasingly complicated problems. As research in advanced literacy acquisition increasingly demonstrates, moral, cognitive, and practical rhetorical maturities have common origins and measure each other.

The implications of my applications of Kohlberg's work to the abilities of young, non-remedial, freshmen should speak to us, I think about our uncorroborated intuitions and practices. First, more accurate developmental models for teaching writing must extend far beyond those beginning to be developed for what we call remedial-level instruction. Most studies of language acquisition and cognitive development concentrate on young children. In psychology, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and in writing James Britten and Walter Loban have strongly implied that while a child may understand complicated concepts before age 15, it is uncommon for the child to originate and express in writing such concepts before ages 16-17. But because most research does not extend to people removed from the school population, and because most of it is done in departments of education and psychology rather than in the humanistic disciplines concerned with the influence of thinking on the artifacts any culture produces, we have very little to go on now in developing a model for cognitive growth in the non-remedial students we teach in college.

And the only issue that my investigations have so far settled for me is that my expectations of beginning freshmen have not been relevant to the level of cognitive development they typically achieve early in college. Universal problems written about for universal audiences are not suitable topics for young collegiate writers unless they have had extensive practice reading and writing about increasingly complicated abstractions. I guess about, and continue to discover, some other premises:

First, I am struck by the similarity between typical disappointed responses to beginning writing and to more advanced writing by students who are struggling toward new levels of cognitive development. The abstract platitudes or personal anecdotes of basic writers elaborating a generalization are more blatant versions of the "vague," "wordy," or "over-inflated" writing of better-prepared freshmen dealing with new problems that they cannot comfortably incorporate into their cognitive abilities. It is possible that a complete developmental model of the process of learning to write would note that writers withdraw from overly difficult problems in similar ways at whatever level development they may be. Given a new level of difficulty to deal with, in the form of a newly complex rhetorical situation, a writer's abilities to transcend and control the rhetorical strategies that result in a voice, an audience and a tone seem to disintegrate, while these problems may be easily solved if the complexity of the abstractions that must be mastered in writing is reduced. I am reminded myself of feeling completely in control of my senior papers in college, but then inadequate to write graduate school papers, and then of losing the control I had learned in graduate school when writing a journal article. I guess, then, that the recursive nature of composing any one piece of writing, which has so clearly been demonstrated in Janet Emig's The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders, is imitated by the recursive stages of moving from one to another stage of cognitive involvement in a writing problem. The stops and starts that so often produce sentence fragments in basic writing papers are, I hypothesize, imitated by stops and starts in moving toward expressions of increasingly complicated thought. Kohlberg notices this moving ahead and falling back in moral/cognitive development, and I would expect to find it imitated in the development of cognitive complexity and rhetorical strategies.

I have seen ample evidence in Ohio State's remedial and freshman programs that students who are learning begin to make more mistakes as they begin to take greater risks with their writing; I imagine that sentence-level "mistakes" are found later as artificiality and vagueness on the part of experienced adults.

The second guess I would make about the nature of a complete developmental model of the writing process would be that the cognitive growth of college students must be initiated by putting them in writing and discussion situations that lead them toward the level of moral/cognitive development typical of those who appreciate most literature. I have often suspected that one reason for declining enrollments in literature courses is that the students often cannot read literature easily. Kohlberg's work suggests that I may be correct if reading is understood not as decoding or deciphering, but instead as making meaning -- choosing a significant, congruent, and unified structure of interpretation. Poor reading comprehension would be identical to misunderstanding the complex, usually Post-conventional paradigms for problem solving within which literary characters are presented. The generality of students are not ready and do not choose to read, understand, and grapple with literary texts when they enter college, precisely because of the writing crisis so mis-defined as a "grammar" problem by the public. The sudden enthusiasm of sophomores and juniors that sometimes appears in literature classes may reflect their movement from one stage of competence to another. Kohlberg would say that arriving at stage 4 reasoning at age 18 or 19 allows the student to understand the complexity of stage 5, Post-conventional, thought. I'm guessing, then, that the poor preparation and lack of practice at solving problems of many members of today's freshman class makes them less able to take literature courses. Now that relative political calm does not make it necessary for an 18 year old to

question a war or the draft, a greater burden is on us as composition teachers to assign and control progressively general discussions of problems that actually include conflict relevant to decisions that young students will, as adults, confront.

It may be that the simulated atmosphere so burdensome in freshman writing, in which no matter what the imagined audience the student is still aware that it is the teacher who will give a grade, can only be overcome when the content of another discipline supplies context for writing. If artificiality and vagueness at all levels do arise from renewed uncertainty about a real subject and real audience, then explaining a real problem and solution to a well-defined audience primarily interested in an essay's content will promote new levels of control and virtuosity.

But in whatever setting, Post-conventional, and thus post-freshman, writing will be fostered by teaching beyond the specifics and details, or concreteness, demanded in the typical freshman course. Clearly, students will not move beyond abilities to describe or narrate unless they are taught the terminology of complicated perspectives. What linguists call"rich bits," a vocabulary connoting many complications, can open up new perspectives for a student ready to move beyond Kohlberg's conventional levels of thought. Had the students writing the sample about Heinz and the morality of stealing the drug for his wife had in their working vocabularies words like "due process," "discriminate," "relativism," "transcendant," "existential," they might have broken through their sometimes tortured vacillations between the virtues of legal authority and of individual niceness. Vocabulary building, teaching the language and terminology of specialists, is, put reductively, the traditional and accepted task of a university. It is also

probably a necessary part of a complete, developmental encouragement of cognitive growth--students must move from perceiving closely the specific parts of any perceptual field to conceptualizing a whole system within which specific points make sense to them individually, rather than collectively or conventionally. From part to whole, the method of induction, is probably necessarily followed by whole to part meaning-making, the method of gestalt. And learning specialized philosophical, critical, historical, and technical vocabularies allows these new perspectives on bits of data.

My hypothetical developmental model, incomplete as it is, closes then with the suggestion of yet another recursive movement: this time from specific to general beginning writing, from generalizations to attention to specifics for freshman writers, and again from specific data to complex generalizations for more advanced writers. These suggestions for a model of course remain to be tested. Whatever else is clear, questions of sequence in the development of expository prose must be attended to and answered if learning to write is to be completely described and then accurately applied in instruction.

APPENDIX

"By stealing the drug, Heinz not only committed an illegal feat, but he also performed an act exhibiting emotional instability and a distorted conception of moral obligation."

"When an illegal action is performed on the basis of morals, it is always hard to judge whether or not it is wrong if you look at it from a moral standpoint. However, if you look at it practically and in terms of the law, which in almost every case you should, one would not have much difficulty in making a judgement."

"Laws were made as the fairest possible set of rules and regulations for which all people could lead their lives. If you start making exceptions for some cases you will have to make exceptions for other cases to balance things out, otherwise people will say the laws are prejudiced and would have little respect for them."

"In conclusion, had Heinz thought about the consequences of the actions he took before he took them, he would have seen that they would get him into a great deal of trouble, and would not aid in saving his wife."

"There are always going to be times when one man's morals or beliefs will differ from the law, and as a result, there will always be conflicts."

"The man was right in taking the drug for his wife, because he followed his moralistic values."

"No matter what type of pressure society would put on the man, he upheld his beliefs and what was important to him. Therefore he disregarded honesty and stealing verses his wife's life, mainly because his wife's life held more importance to him than the consequences he faced. The man simply did what he believed was right, he risked receiving tangible consequences, such as prisonment, to keep the intangible property of life. Not only did he hold a high regard and love for his wife and her life by obtaining the drug, but he showed a love and regard for himself. He stole the drug to be at peace with himself, happy knowing he saved his wife's life. He did what he thought was right, ignoring society and respecting his values."

"Although he probably felt guilty for stealing, that guilt would have been nothing compared to what he would have felt if he had let his wife die without giving her the chance the drug gave her. Ethically, Heinz was wrong. Morally, however, he was right and your morals are what you have to live with."

"One thousand dollars is practically nothing compared to the money the druggist could have received by selling his idea to research or to a manufacturer."

"Stealing is a crime against society, but to deny life is a crime against God. Heinz should protect his wife's life, even if it means stealing."

"He knew it was wrong to steal, because a person who robs a bank, or steals a car will go to prison. This is different, Heinz reasoned, his wife's life could depend on this drug, and he could not let her die. The right to life is more important than money, and this druggist is not going to let my wife die, thought Heinz. Finally out of desperation Heinz broke into the store and stole the drug."

"Stealing the drug was a criminal offense. Society punishes those who do not conform to the established rules. Heinz knew all of this, but he still went against society. The act was socially unacceptable but the circumstances prompting the act were morally unjust. I'm not implying that stealing is right, but Heinz was ready to accept the consequences. If the drug saved his wife's life, the punishment would be worth it to him."

"Nor did he really steal anything (attempted only)."

"Heinz really loved his wife. He did break a law, but he felt he had a reason to...Of course he was wrong for what he did."

"He only stole some drugs to help his wife. No, this is impossible because once someone becomes a criminal he will always be a criminal. He may have stolen for his wife's good, but once a crime is committed it is even easier to do it another time when it may come in handy."

"Laws, such as the one against stealing, were made to bring order into society, protecting every individual's rights; this includes both the druggist's and Heinz's. In stealing, Heinz was legally wrong."

"Finally through his actions, Heinz showed his distorted conception of moral obligation by resorting to theft to try to save his wife. He must have felt it was his duty to acquire the radium at any expense, to prove his loyalty and love for his wife. This indicates that if he had not been under pressure, Heinz possibly would not have gone to such extremes as thievery. Therefore, if it was not considered a normal occurence that was performed, then he was wrong for doing it."

"Heinz stole a drug which was wrong. He had very good reason for stealing it but that is beside the point. The drug was not his, he should not have taken it and he should be punished. There can be no two ways about it."

"What Heinz did was wrong, that cannot be argued. But what can be argued is whether or not his actions can be justified either ethically or socially."

"It is all a matter of morality and value for human life."

"Yes, Heinz should break into the shop and steal the drug. He has no other choice. He needs the drug soon or his wife will die. Heinz is left with nothing else to do."

"Therefore he disregarded honesty and stealing versus his wife's life, mainly because his wife's life held more importance to him than the consequences he faced. The man simply did what he believed was right, he risked receiving tangible consequences, such as prisonment, to keep the intangible property of life. Not only did he hold a high regard and love for his wife and her life by obtaining the drug, but he showed a love and regard for himself. He stole the drug to be at peace with himself, happy knowing he saved his wife's life. He did what he thought was right, ignoring society and respecting his values."

"On his moral scale of priorities the preservation of human life was much higher than the practice of obeying society's rules and regulations. Heinz must have been a basically good man, and I feel he was right in committing this act to to save the life of the woman he loved more than anything."

"Collecting money from those he knew was certainly not the only legal means whereby Heinz could have obtained money for the radium drug. Why didn't he attempt to borrow the money from a bank or for that matter from several different banks if necessary? Certainly a thousand dollars is not an unusually large sum of money for a bank to loan out in a life and death matter such as this."

"At this point then, it seems clear that Heinz's illegal act of breaking and entering was hastily resorted to and uncalled for in light of legal alternatives available to him."

"The moral issue stems from the Bible. In the book of Exodus chapter 20, or in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 5, we find the Ten Commandments. Ten laws set down by God that cannot be ignored. One of these laws is: Thou shalt <u>not</u> kill." (Euthanasia)

"Justice cannot prevail where the law is weak enough to allow any escape from punishment to go unattended."

"Heinz is a beautiful person who wants to help people. He worries more about other people than himself."